



**Statement of Iris J. Toyer
Before the Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
Friday, May 20, 2005**

To Chairman Davis, members of the Committee and especially Congresswoman Norton, good morning. My name is Iris J. Toyer and I am the Chairperson of Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools and a D.C. Public School system parent.

Parents United has a long history in the District of Columbia. The organization was founded in 1981 in the face of devastating teacher layoffs. Parents from all over the city came together to fight impending budget cuts. Since then we have acted as the parental conscience in education matters, advocating more effective and intelligent allocation of resources to the classroom, lower pupil/teacher ratios, effective fire inspections of the schools, the provision of school nurses and athletic trainers for every school and major athletic program, stiffer graduation requirements, and more effective teacher evaluations. We have participated on policy focused task forces on parental involvement, student enrollment, records security, and other issues.

As a local organization, Parents United is unparalleled in our understanding of the school budget. Through our communications network, we provide invaluable information to parents and interested citizens about hearings, school board meetings, events and changes within the school system. Having watched and worked with eight superintendents, dozens of school board members, city council members and hundreds of PTA presidents and other active parents, we are the city's institutional memory on public education.

The mission of Parents United is to empower parents and the community with the necessary information and advocacy skills needed to actively participate in the transformation of not only their local school but the D.C. Public School system as a whole in order to ensure educational success for all of our children.

The organization extends its thanks to the Committee for the opportunity to address you on behalf of tens of thousands of parents in the District of Columbia who support our school system and are working everyday to make it a system of which we can all be proud. After all, it is our children's educational outcomes that are at stake.

Because Parents United prides itself on being a strong voice for D.C. Public School parents across our city, I thought it important that my statement be reflective of that mix. To that end, I submitted the questions to parents on our mailing list and hope that my statement honors their responses as well as my own experience.

Since the focus of this hearing is on the collaborative efforts among school staff, parents, policy makers, agencies and organizations that are engaging the city's youth to improve student participation and performance, I will frame my statement around the questions that were included in the invitation.

I. What is your impression of DCPS? What resources are needed to improve low performing schools and what support is needed to help students and parents served by these schools?

DC Public Schools is a system in recovery. It is attempting to make a comeback from ten years of being mangled by elected and appointed officials at every level of government. It has suffered from disputes over governance, constant changes in leadership, vouchers, a proliferation of charter schools, underfunding of both the operational and capital budgets, and a seeming lack of concern about providing an adequate education to the children of the District of Columbia.

There are many dedicated alumni of DC Public Schools currently working in our schools attempting to provide our children the same high quality education they received many

years ago. Frankly, they do this despite the declining dollar value of the budget, the undependable budget delivery system for the annual budget, and changes of administrative focus.

It should be noted that in 1996 when the Control Board took over the city and a Chief Financial Officer was appointed, the Superintendent and Board of Education were summarily dismissed. As you know, in its place the Control Board appointed its own Emergency Board of Trustees. We found that upon their departure in 2001, not much had changed.

While the city's financial picture had improved we found:

- the lack of functional financial reporting systems created by decisions made under the Control Board regarding which accounting systems would be used by the city have cost our school system MILLIONS of dollars, and made it impossible for local schools to monitor their budgets, let alone do accurate financial predicting.
- The dismantling of human resource systems, including the failure to produce any accurate Schedule A reports led to a widespread lack of controls on all aspects of the human resource systems. It has taken YEARS to attempt to rectify portions of the disarray and DCPS is still working on repairing the damage.
- Gross underfunding of school needs especially in facilities repair and maintenance

The level of dysfunction in the wake of the Control Board was startling and is still being dealt with today.

I would suggest that low performing schools need what high performing schools require: well trained teachers and principals--both of whom have high expectations for every child; support from central administration; and the level of resources that accurately reflect the cost of educating low-income students.

Parents United would like to see financial assistance for degreed instructional staff working to become certified. Currently there are nearly 1,400 uncertified teachers. Four years ago the school system terminated hundreds of teachers who had failed to become certified in the requisite timeframe. The system proceeded to hire more teachers and

grant them provisional certification. Once again the time has come due. It is a vicious cycle from which a school district will not easily escape if action is not taken to provide financial support.

There must be acknowledgment that DC children are entitled to art, music, foreign language, science instruction with fully equipped laboratories, opportunities for contemporary career and technical education, recreational opportunities in and out of school, and experience with current educational technology. These, along with core academic subjects, must be taught in buildings that are clean and in good repair. We owe this to all children and we ought to make DCPS the internationally recognized exemplar of how the U.S. meets the needs of poor minority students.

It is important to acknowledge that shortly after his arrival, Dr. Janey's took steps to put in place high academic standards that will be implemented this fall. I know that a great deal of work is being done to provide the matching curriculum and testing instrument that will fairly assess our schools.

How can parents and students be empowered to succeed? Does DCPS do a good job engaging parents and keeping them informed?

DCPS needs to *inspire* its staff, parents and students. We have many pockets of success that are not recognized. We have several schools on the *Newsweek* list of 1000 top high schools, with at least one (Benjamin Banneker Academic High School) in the top 100. We have national award winning teachers such as Mr. Kamras. We have cause for optimism. We need almost evangelical zeal to take hold in our city and inspire everyone in DCPS. We have been beaten down by bad press, decades of under funding, and the literal decay of our infrastructure. We have been deprived for so long that a few new improvements will go a long way to improving morale and creating a feeling of empowerment.

Parents whose children attend DCPS however need far more information than they currently receive about such issues as: school readiness, good nutrition, how to read to children, free programs and events in the city that complement the curriculum, educational standards, standardized testing, how to work with their child's teacher to address their child's needs, afterschool programs, recreational programs, new programs that are being offered, programs for Special education students, and much more.

The school system currently provides little or no information to parents aside from forms required for enrollment and immunization requirements, and truancy policy. The result is that many parents are very unconnected from of their schools and do not feel welcome. Their interest in what happens to their children all day is viewed with suspicion. Many feel that their children may suffer consequences if parents ask too many questions about what is happening at school.

On the bright side, I believe that Dr. Janey understands that he and his team have the responsibility to change the attitudes and behaviors of school administrators and teachers toward parents. He has spoken regularly of establishing parent centers at several sites across the city. We are hopeful that they will be online during the coming school year. Meanwhile, a concerted effort is required of all community organizations (including churches, businesses that employ significant numbers of DC residents, parent organizations, and others) to reach out to parents and encourage their involvement in our schools. We believe that improving our schools and their connections with parents is the responsibility of the entire community and not just the school system.

Do you feel the DCPS capital plan and budget is realistic and fiscally responsible in meeting the goals and objectivess of DCPS Master Facility Plan.

This question has several underlying issues. First the Master Facility plan was created at a time when there were more students in our school. Consequently, it needs to be revised to reflect the current enrollment with an eye towards future needs. Having made

that point, the proposed capital budget would in no way sufficiently support a major capital program. DCPS's buildings are on average 60 – 70 years old, suffering from years of neglect and literally falling down around the children's shoulders.

I think the better question is whether the Master Facility Plan as currently proposed supports the academic needs of the students and if not, what will such a plan cost and can it be afforded?

While I would love to answer in the affirmative, I have to say that at this moment DCPS does not have the infrastructure to carry out an intensive expansion of the capital improvement plan. Less than 8 years ago, every school had an assigned building engineer who kept the boiler repaired and saw that maintenance was carried out on a schedule. Today the same engineer may serve as many as 8-10 schools. Extreme cutbacks in personnel, particularly those with the technical skills to carry out repair work, have left us without the foundation for a large-scale modernization program. Leadership in the facilities management division has gone through many changes—rivaling or exceeding the turnover in Superintendents.

We have several beautiful newly built schools, the construction undertaken by the Army Corps of Engineers has been substandard, incomplete, not done according to schedule and at extreme cost overruns. Furthermore, the school system could not hold this contractor accountable for work done or not done. Parents around the city can site numerous examples of shoddy work done by the Corps. The decision to use the Army Corps for DCPS construction and facilities work was again one of the unfortunate consequences of the Control Board. Currently the one school under construction with DCPS managing the project is on schedule and on budget at last check.

SCHOOL SAFETY

It is important that the Committee has a clearer picture of DCPS and our city. While there have been a number of very high profile incidents in our schools it is not true that 5

to 7 Ballou students are killed each year. Clearly this one year has been an anomaly. Yes, there are metal detectors in our secondary schools; but there are just as many if not more in the very buildings in which you work. School safety is a concern. As a member of the planning committee of the D.C. Education Compact, I listened to the nearly 150 young people who attended our two youth forums discuss their concerns with school safety.

You should also know that the city has moved forward in creating a stronger linkage between the police department and our school security. Public school advocates who have attended the planning meetings have been tremendously impressed with the Police Departments willingness to work with them, principals and community members to insure that plan is implemented in a manner that will achieve success—safe schools.

TRUANCY/RECORD KEEPING SYSTEMS

Student data systems have not operated according to norms of other districts, nor have personnel been adequately trained to use the systems, nor have the systems been activated quickly enough to respond to new mandates and new needs for information. This has resulted in poor record keeping and the production of bad data. Perhaps this will be improved under the STARS student database system that will be operational in SY 05-06 in all schools.

In closing I want to leave you with this: Leadership of the free world is an awesome responsibility. An educated citizen is the most critical component of a successful city or nation.